

"ANTI-SEMITISM" AND THE ROSENBERG CASE

The Latest Communist Propaganda Trap

LUCY S. DAWIDOWICZ

THERE is something about Communist demonology that gives it a special power over large areas of the modern mind, and which insures that a vigorously conducted Communist propaganda campaign, no matter how flagrantly at variance with plain facts, will get some sort of hearing. This is especially the case when such a campaign can be fueled by the widespread anti-American sentiments that are fashionable in other countries—and even to be found in some circles in the United States. Thus, the accusation that the United States is in the hands of a warmongering Pentagon clique, with its citizens in a state of terror, and concentration camps and other fascist appurtenances just around the corner, is solemnly noted by more than a handful of self-styled "progressives" on these shores.

At the moment, the Communists have several propaganda campaigns under way, with varying effect. One of them is particularly noteworthy, not so much for its success (to date, it has had very little), but for its breath-taking mendacity and impudence. This campaign aims to persuade the world at large that the American government is in

the hands of an anti-Semitic conspiracy which is inexorably working up to the extermination of American Jewry, and that the conviction of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg for espionage is a 1952 version of the Reichstag fire, prelude to an American version of Auschwitz.

(The primary intention of this hullabaloo is, of course, to demonstrate that anti-Communism leads inevitably to anti-Semitism, and that the Truman administration, by resisting the march of world Communism, must thereby develop into a fascist regime. A secondary aim, no doubt, is to pick up sympathy and support from individual Jews who may be suckers for this particular bait—especially in its present underground stage the party needs non-Communist covers, which it hopes to find among "minorities" and the "liberal" intelligentsia. A possible third intention—and this is unprovable at the moment, though it is far from inconsistent with Communist strategy in other parts of the globe—is to further provoke the lunatic fringe of anti-Semites by confirming the equivalence of "Jew" and "Communist," thus creating fertile soil for the kind of bitter divisive strife that the Communists know so well how to exploit.)

As has been said, so far this campaign has been anything but a signal success, nor is there any reason to believe it will become one. In any case, it is worth recording how this smear was born and how it grew—if only as a warning to some susceptible citizens, and to increase the general understanding of the mechanism of the Big Lie. There will be new ones, and not only in France and Indonesia. Not that the danger from this particular mendacious smear is over. As COMMENTARY goes to press, ads in the *Daily Worker* announce the major effort in the campaign to date, two mass meetings

ON MARCH 29, 1951, Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were convicted of atomic espionage, and it was thought that our society had dealt justly with a case of high treason. This did not reckon with the Communists who, after a period of absolute silence, suddenly discovered that the trial was nothing less than part of a nefarious anti-Semitic plot by the American government! Here, LUCY S. DAWIDOWICZ recounts the story of one of the most brazen recent efforts of the Communist apparatus to exploit "minority" fears and sympathies for its own purposes. Miss Dawidowicz, who studied at Hunter College and Columbia University, is on the staff of the Library of Jewish Information of the American Jewish Committee.

in New York, in Brooklyn and on the West Side of Manhattan.

THE first instance of a deliberate identification of anti-Communism as anti-Semitism came in the second half of 1950, in the case of eight New York public school teachers suspended because they had refused to deny Communist party membership. The *Daily Worker* wrote (September 21, 1950): "The campaign against the teachers, all of whom are Jewish, is part of a drive by the Catholic hierarchy against academic freedom and the Teachers Union."

The New York *Daily Compass*, which sometimes strays from the line but somehow seems never to leave the neighborhood, wrote: "If Superintendent Jansen gets away with the suspension of these eight teachers without adequate public protest, anti-Semitism will have been established as a guiding rule for the tax-paid educational system of the community which includes the largest number of Jews in the world."

A phantom group, the "Council of Jewish Organizations in Brownsville," protested to the Board of Education on this "manifestation of anti-Semitism," and news releases went out to the Jewish press, urging it to rise in protest. But the campaign to identify these teachers as Jewish was not violently promoted: the issue was local and most of the public was sufficiently aware of the true nature of the situation. This case may have been intended merely as a trial balloon to test the new technique; at any rate, the Communist campaign died down—but not for long.

SEVERAL months later the trial of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg for wartime atomic espionage took place. It was not discussed in the Communist press, just as the Coplon case, the Hiss case, and others had not been. It was the kind of story Communists did not talk about. Had a man from Mars alighted on this planet during February and March 1951, and read only the *Daily Worker*, he would not even have known about the Rosenbergs' trial. On March 30, 1951, the

Daily Worker published its first news report on the case. This is the item in its entirety:

3 CONVICTED IN "ESPIONAGE" TRIAL

Two men and a woman were convicted here yesterday by a Federal Court jury on a charge of espionage for the Soviet Union during the war.

Those convicted were Julius Rosenberg, electrical engineer; his wife, Ethel, mother of two children; and Morton Sobell, electronics expert.

The main government witness was David Greenglass, brother of Mrs. Rosenberg.

This might have been the total extent of the Communist reaction to the Rosenberg case, obviously not easy to twist to propaganda purposes, had it not been for the reaction of the anti-Communist Yiddish press to the death sentence pronounced by the judge on April 5, 1951. None of these papers expressed doubt as to the guilt of the Rosenbergs; all voiced their revulsion at the crime. Their protest was restricted to what they considered an excessively harsh sentence in view of the punishment received by, for instance, Klaus Fuchs and Allan Nunn May. After the appearance of these articles in the outspokenly anti-Communist Yiddish press, the *Daily Worker*, the *Freiheit* (the Communist Yiddish daily newspaper), and the English-language Communist monthly *Jewish Life* commented on the death sentence, each time carefully drawing attention to the objections of non-Communists. The Communist press was still, at this point, handling the Rosenberg case very gingerly.

Four months later, on August 8, 1951, the fellow-traveling *National Guardian*, a "progressive weekly" of eight pages in tabloid form, announced that it would "expose the 'evidence' on which two beloved and respected American parents" had been sentenced to death. Two weeks later the *Guardian* began publication of a series of seven articles by a special correspondent, William A. Reuben, entitled: "The Rosenberg Conviction: Is This the Dreyfus Case of Cold War America?" The articles described the entire trial as one gigantic frame-up based on FBI collusion with a "self-confessed" spy

and "stool-pigeon," David Greenglass, in which the Rosenbergs were two "innocent" people who were "victims of a political frame-up designed to convince the public that Communists, or people who can be so labeled, are by their very existence a danger to the country's security and the people's safety." In these seven articles there was only one reference to the issue of "anti-Semitism," a sentence drawing attention to the lack of any Jew on the jury "in a city more than 30 per cent Jewish in population."⁹

As soon as Reuben's "exposé" was completed, the *National Guardian* announced the "spontaneous" formation of a "National Committee to Secure Justice in the Rosenberg Case," with Reuben as provisional chairman. Letters to the editor began to appear, tentatively exploiting the "Jewish" issue for the first time. Howard Fast wrote: "I think the case for the Rosenbergs as put forth by the *Guardian* is one of the most brilliant and daring pieces of journalism in our times. I not only take my hat off to you, but I wish, as an American Jew, to express my sincere gratitude and my homage for your fearless and unshakable integrity."

Albert Bein, another writer of the same political persuasion, wrote: "The Rosenbergs shall not die! Their freedom means your own salvation and mine. Raise your voices, all you Jews, both rich and poor!"

(The "National Committee to Secure Justice in the Rosenberg Case" started its work by collecting funds to publish in pamphlet form Reuben's articles. It really began to function with a view to arousing mass feeling at the beginning of 1952, when Joseph Brainin took over the permanent chairmanship of the committee and recruited, it was claimed, 125 people whose names were to fill the committee's letterheads.)

⁹A check of 156 names impaneled for courtroom jury service on the Rosenberg case reveals that fifteen names were obviously Jewish. Of these, ten were excused by the court for personal reasons, four were challenged by the defense, and one was challenged by the government. There were probably other Jews on this panel, but only these fifteen names were clearly Jewish.

(Brainin will be remembered for his connection with the Communist-front magazine *The Protestant*, and a host of other Communist-inspired enterprises.) And now the campaign began in earnest to turn the Rosenberg case into a *cause célèbre*.

IN JANUARY 1952, fully nine months after the conviction of the Rosenbergs, *Jewish Life* published an article by Louis Harap, "Anti-Semitism and the Rosenbergs," which declared: "A lowering cloud of anti-Semitism hangs over the death sentence of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg for alleged atomic espionage. . . . The death sentence and the entire case of the Rosenbergs must therefore be seen in the context of the threatening atomic war and the fascist and anti-Semitic dangers that are an integral part of this threatening war. To fight to reverse the death sentence against the Rosenbergs is to fight against the anti-Semitic implications of the whole affair."

On February 28, 1952, the *Daily Worker* chimed in: "The Rosenberg case is a ghastly political frame-up. It was arranged to provide blood victims to the witch-hunters, to open the door to new violence, anti-Semitism, and court lynchings of peace advocates and Marxists as 'spies.'"

Two weeks later, the Civil Rights Congress, which was already busy propagating the charge that the United States government, in its treatment of Negroes, was guilty of "genocide," issued a press release, distributed throughout the country with particular attention to the Anglo-Jewish press, calling for support of the Rosenberg defense. William L. Patterson, executive secretary, declared that "the Rosenberg frame-up is a new high in the growing anti-Semitism." He went on to say: "The lynching of these two innocent American Jews, unless stopped by the American people, will serve as a signal for a wave of Hitler-like genocidal attacks against the Jewish people throughout the United States. . . . The murder of the Rosenbergs will inevitably lead to new and fiercer attacks on Jewish synagogues such as we have seen in Florida,

to more Hitler youth movements as have grown in Philadelphia."

After attacking the prosecutor and the trial judge and one of the justices of the Court of Appeals, all of whom happened to be Jewish, as "Quislings to the Jewish people" and declaring that their presence confirmed the "anti-Semitic nature of the government's death sentence" [!] the release concluded: "Stop the anti-Semitic legal lynching of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg!"

The "National Committee to Secure Justice in the Rosenberg Case" claims to have organized local committees in about twenty-five cities. Special efforts are being made to enlist the support of Jews at large, to place announcements and advertisements in Jewish newspapers, to win the sympathy of rabbis. One two-page circular is entitled "A Fact Sheet on Anti-Semitism in the Case," the only facts referred to being the absence of Jewish jurors and the presence of a Jewish judge.

(No trick of demagogy has been ignored in this campaign. Rabbis have been circularized with a pathetic letter written by the nine-year-old son of the Rosenbergs, addressed to "Dear God and good people," in which the child writes that "Uncle David told lies to the judge and jury" about his parents.) The wife of Morton Sobell, convicted with the Rosenbergs and sentenced to thirty years, has recorded a remarkable address, which, after branding the trial a frame-up, goes on to say how proud she is that her husband "stuck by his friends to the end." This address, presented by tape recording, forms the eerie climax of meetings now being held throughout the country, as frightening in their own divorce from reality as the meetings of anti-Semitic sects. A reporter present at one of them writes: "The general atmosphere was that of a minor conspiracy. Mingled expressions of fear, defiance, and importance characterized all present. . . . The theme of anti-Semitism and anti-minorityism, the threat of impending mass extermination and gas chambers, comparison to Nazi methods and policies, stood out as the major intention of this rally. If the Rosenbergs must die—

then all Jews will have to die' was the thought with which people were sent home."

THIS particular meeting was in a large center of Jewish population, was well publicized, and attracted six hundred people. It was addressed by Mr. Reuben and a rabbi, among others. The rabbi was a rarity; for the Rosenberg campaign has been carried on in the face of strong attack by all leading Jewish communal agencies. This, of course, has resulted in the Communists' vilifying all bona fide Jewish leaders as "traitors." It was Ethel Rosenberg—clearly still regarding herself as under party discipline—who led off the attack on these alleged "traitors," after the Court of Appeals in a decision written by Jerome Frank had upheld the conviction of the lower court. Mrs. Rosenberg charged: "This is the way the *Judenrat* performed for the Nazis in the Warsaw Ghetto."

The characterization of leading Jewish organizations as a *Judenrat* has since been repeated with the persistent monotony of Communist propaganda. *Jewish Life*, in its May 1952 issue, expatiated at length on the "Rise of an American 'Judenrat'": "The *Judenrat* in the ghettos was created, as the German title implies, *by the Nazis* to further *their interests* in the Jewish community. Under present conditions in our country, pro-fascist reaction is not yet capable of appointing Jewish *Gauleiters* on a broad scale. However, we are witnessing a new development, different from the ghetto-*Judenrat* in that Jewish leaders are *themselves* assuming the function of the *Judenrat* serving the interests of growing fascism as agents within the Jewish community. . . . As emboldened fascist elements grow more powerful, the American version of the *Judenrat* becomes bolder in its betrayal. We, who still have it in our hands to keep fascism from developing in our country, can also reject the *Judenrat* before it becomes the dominant force in the Jewish community. We must reject the blind 'anti-Communist' line—reminiscent of Hitlerism—behind which the *Judenrat* seeks to lead the Jewish people to destruction."

This description of Jewish organizations,

of a piece with the long-time Communist smear campaign against responsible Jewish leadership as reactionary, fascist-collaborating oligarchs and conspiratorial enemies both of democracy and their own oppressed people, has been applied to the American Jewish Committee, the Anti-Defamation League, the National Jewish Welfare Board, the Jewish Labor Committee, local Jewish community councils and community centers, the B'nai B'rith, the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany, and a host of other Jewish organizations.

It is obvious that the Communists, by such propaganda, aim to enlist Jews in defense of Communists and their interests. But it is

equally obvious—or should be—that the Communists are also engaged in an insidious campaign, which if it succeeded could only serve to establish guilt (though they call it "innocence") by false association. Because a spy or a Communist is a Jew, the Communists proclaim that all Jews are collectively involved. More—the Communists take it upon themselves to make this involvement a reality, so far as their powers permit. That, in the process, great damage may be done to American Jews, far from restraining the Communists, seems only to encourage them. It is well to be on guard; we have seen how similar campaigns of identification and accusation have strengthened the hands of anti-Semitic forces elsewhere.

DEATH OF A GRANDMOTHER

HARVEY SHAPIRO

LET me borrow her corpse a little.
Over that clown in finest linen,
Over that white-dressed dummy, pretty girl,
(Dressed for a party, the daughters cried)
Let me speak a line.

The dead lie in a ditch of fear,
In an earth wound, in an old mouth
That has sucked them there.
My grandmother drank tea, and wailed
As if the Wailing Wall kissed her head
Beside the kitchen window;
While the flaking, green-boxed radio
Retailed in Yiddish song
And heartache all day long.
Or laughter found her,
The sly, sexual humor of the grave.

Yet after her years of dragging leg,
Of yellowed sight,
She still found pain enough
To polish off the final hours with a shriek.
To what sweet kingdom do the old
Jews go?

Now mourned by her radio and bed,
She wishes me health and children,
Who am her inheritor.

I sing her a song of praise.
She meddled with my childhood
Like a witch, and I can meet her
Curse for curse in that slum heaven where
we go
When this American dream is spent—
To give her a crust of bread, a little love.

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